

# **ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE**

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## ***Thinking Biblically about the Human Conscience***

Romans 1:18-3:21 declares quite clearly that God has revealed Himself in three major ways: Through His creation, through human conscience and through His moral Law given to Israel. Further, Hebrews 1 (and indeed the entire New Testament) also makes clear that Jesus is God's crowning revelation. Each of these four revelations of God insists upon a responsible and accountable response. In short, humanity cannot ignore these revelations of God.

But, Paul makes clear in Romans 1:18-32 that humanity often suppresses the truth about God so clearly manifested in His creation. Romans 1:1-16 also declares that humans distort and twist the revelation of God in the human conscience. Humanity also flatly rejects the moral law of God and seeks its own "law" and its own ethical standards. Finally, the central question over the last 2,000 years of history remains, "what will you do with Jesus?"

There is a significant degree of clarity about God's creation, about God's moral law and about Jesus. Each posits clearly defined parameters that lead to either belief or rejection. But "conscience" is more difficult. Exactly what does the Bible mean by conscience? What is the role of conscience in the believer's life? Is it our guide? Let's think biblically about this important term.

The term "conscience" is not found in the Old Testament (OT). Perhaps the closest OT term to conscience is "heart" (e.g., 1 Samuel 24:5). In the New Testament (NT) "conscience" is used 31 times, mostly by Paul. The key passage is Romans 2:14-15. Scripture teaches that humans, made in the image of God, have an innate sense of right and wrong, a moral monitor that either "approves or accuses" (see Romans 2:14-15). Conscience serves as an umpire, which disposes the human to view life situations in a moral/ethical light, thus judging/determining that some actions are "right" and some are "wrong." The Fall has drastically affected conscience but has clearly not destroyed it. Evidence of this innate sense of right and wrong is a general agreement in all cultures about certain basic ethical issues (e.g., murder, incest, pedophilia, lying, stealing, etc.).

How is conscience developed in the NT? A human being may actually be sincerely following a wrong moral standard that deepens convictions about the "rightness" of certain actions. Consider Paul before his conversion: Saul (as he was then known) persecuted Christians with a "good conscience" (Acts 23:1). His deep-seated conviction (i.e., his conscience) told him "do right" and his ethical standard was "it is right to persecute Christians." Thus he followed his conscience, but what he did was wrong, because his deep-seated conviction (i.e., his

conscience) was ill-informed. God needed to change his convictions, which He did—beginning at the Damascus Road with his salvation.

Consider these other NT references to conscience:

1. When a person becomes a Christian, his/her conscience is heightened and sensitized, as it were, by being informed both by Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit. This is in many ways a lifelong process. When we then violate personal, societal or biblical standards, we experience guilt. This is one of the blessings of the conscience for the believer. This “thermostat” keeps us from doing what might prove injurious to ourselves and to others, and ultimately to our relationship with God. When we willfully sin, conscience in conjunction with the Holy Spirit causes us to experience guilt. We are then prompted to confess our sins (1 John 1:9) and experience the love and forgiveness of God. This is now the ongoing process of how we deal with guilt in our lives—via confession (i.e., agreeing with God about our sin).
2. For the believer, conscience may accuse you of something [or you may have convictions about something] when in actuality the action you are contemplating may either be morally neutral or even right. This is essentially what Paul is discussing in 1 Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14. Here the believer’s conscience is “weak,” (i.e., his/her convictions are not in conformity with the truth—the correct theological “knowledge” about idolatry and food in 1 Corinthians 8, for example). So, at that point the mature believer, with a “strong” conscience, must decide to either press his/her freedom or, because of the undeveloped conscience of the weaker brother/sister, choose not to exercise that freedom. This “weaker” believer then must be open to the liberating teaching of the Holy Spirit who uses God’s Word to teach the truth about all things, including how to look at cultural standards, traditions and practices.
3. For the believer, there is such a thing as a “seared conscience” (e.g., 1 Timothy 4:2). If conscience is disobeyed repeatedly or if a believer refuses to develop the deep-seated convictions about issues of life and the maturing process is then halted, one’s sensitivity to moral issues soon becomes dulled. If this continues, then the result is a seared conscience: Convictions about a particular issue are developed that the believer knows are wrong or those convictions have not been fully informed by God’s Word. In this case, conscience is then “seared.” This is what I believe occurs with some genuine believers when it comes to homosexuality, for example. Convictions are developed that to practice homosexuality is not wrong ethically. Continued sin then desensitizes the conscience and the conscience has been seared—either by conscious disobedience to the clarity of God’s Word, or by convictions developed without the clear teaching of God’s Word. Moreover, Scripture teaches that unconfessed sin and ongoing unbelief can also lead to a desensitized conscience (see Hebrews 3:12-13). As Postmodernism is intersecting with evangelical Christianity, this is occurring with greater frequency.

4. Conscience can also “malfunction” in the sense that it becomes overly sensitive or hypersensitive. Here the conscience “over-functions,” condemning and accusing the Christian for small errors, forgiven actions and normal human failures. This constant self-criticism and self-reproach rob the Christian of joy and any sense of progress in growth toward Christ-likeness. The result is often a performance-based Christianity that focuses on actions, not God’s grace, as the basis for acceptance. Performance-based Christianity is what produces legalism and so much defeat in the Christian life. [For example, “If I am not performing the way I think I should, the way my pastor thinks I should, or the way my friends think I should” can produce the over-sensitive conscience, and thereby false guilt.] False guilt is one of the lethal results of performance-based spirituality.

Conclusion: The goal of the Christian believer, then, is to develop a mature conscience. The Holy Spirit teaches the believer most clearly what is right and wrong from the objective Word of God. That Word informs us of the truth; the Spirit then enables us to “welcome, embrace” that truth (see 1 Corinthians 2:6-16), so that it transforms us from the inside out; and then we begin to develop those deep-seated convictions in the nonmoral areas of life that can guide and direct us. The Bible teaches that it is wrong to go against “conscience” but it also clearly teaches that we must be careful to have our conscience informed by God’s Word.